

HIGHER EDUCATION IN VIETNAM UPDATE – MAY 2004

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FOREWORD

In recent years, Vietnam has been faced with the dilemma of an ever increasing demand for education balanced against a limited supply of scarce resources. Moreover, there has been increasing pressure to upgrade and modify the quality of teacher training, teaching, and curricula to produce graduates with skills needed in the evolving labor market. The satisfaction of these demands on the educational system and the careful allocation of resources will be essential to the country's well-being and future development. The country has responded with creative and innovative approaches. That said, there have been successes and set backs but a general recognition and acceptance that change is needed and is now afoot. The Party's recognition of education as a central factor for the country's industrialization and modernization guarantees that education will remain a major concern in Vietnam for years to come. It is our hope that this report may contribute to an understanding of the current state of higher education in Vietnam.

BACKGROUND

Education has always held an esteemed position within Vietnamese society. From the outset of its independence as a nation, education has been, and continues to be, a major preoccupation of government and a highly valued and respected activity in Vietnamese society. One of the very first actions of the Government in 1945 was to initiate a literacy campaign.¹ This campaign has met with universal success in that as of 2000 Vietnam could demonstrate a literacy rate of 94%.² As of the 2003-2004 school year, there are some 22 million students in the educational system.³ Currently, education occupies approximately 17.1% of all state budget expenditures (around US\$1.6 billion) and is expected to increase to 18% by 2005 and 20% by 2010.⁴ This increase comes as part of an overall plan to revamp and ratchet up the quality of education. Much of the monies devoted to education in the next few years will be directed toward infrastructure, new construction, and the development of information technology and internet access, a key sector specifically targeted for development.⁵

THE MINISTRY OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Since its creation in 1990, The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has assumed responsibility for all education and training at the national level. MOET is divided into many separate departments, of which the most important are those responsible for primary and secondary education, higher education, teacher education and adult education.

MOET's area of responsibility extends to all levels of education including pre-school, general education, professional education, tertiary education, and continuing education.⁶ Consequently, it

¹ Pham Minh Hac, Vietnam's Education: The Current Position and Future Prospects 10-11 (The Gioi Publishers 1998)

² Joint Report of World Bank, Asian Development Bank and UNDP Consultative Group Meeting for Vietnam, December 14-15, 2000, Vietnam 2010: Entering the 21st Century, Vietnam Development Report 2001, Pillars of Development (the World Bank Report), 62 (2000).

³ Ministry of Education and Training, Nguoi Lao Dong, September 2003.

⁴ Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam News, October 2, 2003, Page 1.

⁵ Tuoi Tre HCMC, February 2, 2001, Page 1.

⁶ Vietnam Education, supra, No. 3, Page 11.

wields significant power over education and handles a number of tasks including: (1) the promulgation of regulations affecting curriculum; (2) the drafting and publishing of text books; (3) enrollment and student management; (4) academic assessment procedures and granting of degrees; (5) infrastructure and facility maintenance; (6) staffing and personnel in education; (7) developing future education plans; and (8) providing proposals to the Government for the regulation of education matters such as scholarships, construction of universities, and study abroad.⁷ MOET has partial responsibility -- shared with the Office of the Government (which is attached to the Prime Minister's Office), the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Planning and Investment -- for broader decisions of policy formulation, target setting, and sectoral financing.

The management and financing of education and training are becoming more decentralized in Vietnam. This can be seen from two different perspectives: *horizontal decentralization* and *vertical decentralization*. Horizontal decentralization refers to the functional departments responsible for education and training in the central government. Although MOET plays a pre-eminent role, many institutions in Vietnam fall under other line ministries and government agencies. For example, Hanoi Medical College falls under the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Culture and Information manages the College of Culture and the Hanoi Conservatory.⁸ In one other instance, Vietnam National University, though nominally under MOET, operates independently as a separate entity. The multiplicity of actors can result in duplication, confusion and waste.

Vertical decentralization refers to the different levels of government responsible for education. In higher education and vocational/technical education, with the exception of universities, the role of provincial governments in running educational institutions is at least as large as the role of the central government. In the past, the lack of a formal legal management system led to extreme dependency on MOET which in turn reduced the ability of each institution to respond to community needs in the emerging market economy. The ability to provide vocational training appropriate with the demands made by an emerging market economy remains one of the most pressing issues under discussion in the vocational education arena.

With the recent release of Decree 85 on education reform, which allows local education authorities more power and responsibility to undertake long-term education programs in their respective areas, the central government hopes this will spur further positive changes in education quality⁹. Universities are beginning to obtain autonomy over financing (self management of funding) training, research, human resources, and international cooperation. Education experts hope that this new found autonomy will raise the quality of research and teaching by providing a legal framework of responsibility and accountability. This year, MOET is allowing universities to control their budgets. Under new regulations, university and college managing boards will prepare their own spending plans and implement them with only a supervisory role played by MOET.¹⁰ In another positive sign, universities will be able to raise additional funds through research, production cooperation, etc. to supplement tuition fees which remain set by the State.¹¹ MOET has also given the green light to a pilot scheme to allow the private sector to set up colleges and universities, whereby private tertiary institutions will be governed by a rule shortly to be submitted to the government for

⁷ Vietnam Education, *supra*, No. 3, Page 11-12.

⁸ Pham, *supra*, No. 1, Page 54.

⁹ Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam News, November 2003.

¹⁰ Thoi Bao Tai Chinh Viet Nam, March 3, 2003; VNS, February 27, 2003; Dau Tu, February 24, 2003.

¹¹ *Id.*

approval.¹² According to the new rule these private institutions will be treated the same as state ones and administered by the ministry in terms of professionalism and overseen by the governments of cities and provinces where they are located. These are positive steps amidst ongoing calls for further reductions in centralized oversight from MOET.

One final note is that MOET does not yet have a formal system of evaluating each institution for quality purposes. At this time, all degrees granted by Vietnamese institutions are officially approved and signed by MOET. As more private institutions develop, more joint-programs are offered by non-Vietnamese institutions, and the projected increase of the student population of at least 5% per year for the next ten years begins to take hold, the implementation of more standardized measures of quality will become increasingly urgent.¹³ To that end, last year MOET announced that it would conduct inspections of all tertiary level institutions to identify and implement suitable measures to boost and maintain educational standards.¹⁴ Inspections were slated to include a focus on several criteria and suggest the beginning of a quality management system akin to that familiar to accredited U.S. institutions.¹⁵

TERTIARY EDUCATION IN VIETNAM

In years past, higher education in Vietnam had been similar to that of the former Soviet Union with a multiplicity of small mono-disciplinary institutions with limited linkage between teaching and research. The present structures and procedures have been inherited from the era of central planning when higher education was segmented by economic sectors with many specialized institutions, each with little autonomy of its own, reporting to a particular line ministry.

By Decree No. 90/CP, dated November 24, 1993, the Government addressed the structure of national education and committed to the concept that all should have the right to study and pursue higher education.¹⁶ Following this decree, the number of public, semi-public, private and people established universities increased and began to offer a number of training forms suited to the particular needs of the student.¹⁷ Between 1993 and 1995, total higher education enrollments grew by 117% (from 162,000 to 354,000), while expenditures grew by 63%. The number of higher education institutions has grown from 120 in the early 1990s to a current number of 224 despite the consolidation of several public institutions into larger multi-disciplinary institutions (called national or regional universities).

Following up on the work begun by Decree 90/CP, the Education Law of December 2, 1998 set forth additional stipulations for the Vietnamese higher education system.¹⁸ The Education Law defined higher education as that one receives at the college or university level. It further clarified

¹² Saigon Times Daily, March 11, 2004, Page 3.

¹³ Tuoi Tre HCMC, January 31, 2002; Lao Dong, January 31, 2001; Tin Tuc, December 31, 2001.

¹⁴ Thoi Bao Kinh te Viet Nam, July 22, 2002; Nong Nghiep Viet Nam, July 22, 2002; Nguoi Lao Dong, July 20-21, 2002.

¹⁵ The criteria to be used in such inspections include: the mission of the university, its management and planning systems, teaching activities, scientific and technological research and development efforts, lecturing staff, study materials, students and student assistance programs, infrastructure and training equipment, financial management, and information publicity. *Id.*

¹⁶ Vietnam Education, *supra* No. 3, Page 37.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

the degrees available and the structure for pursuing them. Thus, a student holding the equivalent of a high school diploma may pursue either a 4-6 year academic program for a bachelor's or a 3-year academic program at a junior college. A junior college degree holder may then continue an additional 1-2 years for a bachelor's degree.¹⁹ A student with a bachelor's degree may pursue an additional two years to obtain a master's degree and 4 years to obtain a doctorate.

The Law further clarified which institutions may grant what degrees. Junior colleges remain responsible for 3-year training programs but may share this ability to grant such degrees with universities. Universities may also offer 4-6 year training programs and, with the permission of the Prime Minister, master's and doctoral degrees. Research institutes, though primarily responsible for doctoral degrees,²⁰ may also, with the permission of the Prime Minister, provide master's degrees in cooperation with the universities.²¹ Currently, master's and doctoral training is available at 66 universities, institutes, and academies and 62 research institutes.²²

For 2003, total university and college enrollment is 1,016,500, an increase of 5% from 2002. Enrollments are expected to increase such that by 2005 Vietnam would like to have a ratio of 140 university students for every 10,000 people and 200 per 10,000 by 2010.²³

TYPES OF UNIVERSITIES

There are three broad types of universities in Vietnam²⁴; two of which are more traditional forms meaning that they rely on classroom lectures as their principal medium of instruction. The first of this type are the "specialized universities," each of which focuses on a single area of study, such as economics, engineering, fine arts, or law. The second of this type are the "multi-disciplinary universities," including five newly established national and regional universities in some of Vietnam's largest cities. The third and newest category of university education in Vietnam is the "open university" system in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Already by 1995, only one year after they opened, these accounted for 52,583 students, or approximately one out of every seven higher education students in Vietnam.

There are more than 200 universities and colleges in Vietnam educating approximately 1,000,000 students at any given time. This figure includes a number of junior colleges, but excludes institutions under the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The junior college sector now consists of teachers' colleges and technical and vocational and training colleges offering courses in areas such as agriculture, allied health, fine arts, banking, and policy studies. To consolidate the growth in institutions, in 2001, MOET announced the allocation of \$24 million from a World Bank loan for building and upgrading classrooms, libraries, and other educational

¹⁹ Id., Page 37-38.

²⁰ All master's degrees are issued by the Minister of Education and Training. Id., Page 38.

²¹ Id., Page 38.

²² Id., Page 47.

²³ Tuoi Tre HCMC, April 6, 2001 and Vietnam News, October 2, 2003, Page 2.

²⁴ Universities and colleges in Vietnam are known by a number of English terms, including university, colleges, institute and polytechnic; even "school" is sometimes used. However, in Vietnamese, the institutional title includes the words "dai hoc" meaning that the institution offers a four-year degree program or higher. Non-university-level tertiary institutions use the words "cao dang" meaning they offer associate-type degrees only. Today, most educators in Vietnam use the English term junior college or community college to indicate the "cao dang" institutions.

facilities to improve training quality.²⁵ MOET also has plans to upgrade 10 universities across the country to become major universities.²⁶

A. Multi-disciplinary Universities

In the interest of strengthening the university system and improving and streamlining research at this level, a fundamental reorganization of the institutional basis of higher education took place in the mid 1990s. This involved the consolidation of a relatively large number of small, specialized institutions into several pivotal universities, with the aim of enhancing the links between basic research and university teaching.

The new universities consist of two types -- national and regional -- and are multi-disciplinary in character. Two national universities and three regional universities have already been established. At present, the national universities offer bachelor, master and doctoral programs, while the regional universities offer bachelor, masters and other college-level programs.

Vietnam National University Hanoi, initially established in 1993 as an amalgamation of several universities, including the College of Natural Sciences, the College of Social Sciences and Humanities and the College of Foreign Languages, now also contains the Information Technology Institute.²⁷

Vietnam National University at Ho Chi Minh City, initially known as the Ho Chi Minh City National University, was founded in 1995 from nine institutions.²⁸

Da Nang University, established in 1994 from the Da Nang Foreign Language Teachers College, the Da Nang University of Technology, the Nguyen Van Troi Vocational Training School, and the Da Nang Junior Teacher Training College.²⁹ The new university maintains its emphasis on technical fields, while Hue University to the north, prepares students in social sciences and humanities.

Hue University, founded in 1995 from Hue University, the Hue University of Pedagogy, the Hue Medical School, the Agricultural University of Hue, and the Hue College of Fine Arts.³⁰

Thai Nguyen University was established in 1994 from four university-level institutions (Vietnam Bac Teachers College, Bac Thai College of Agriculture No. 3, Thai Nguyen College of Industry, and Bac Thai/Thai Nguyen/Vietnam Bac College of Medicine), and the Bac Thai Secondary Technical School for Mechanical and Electrical Workers. The new university has five separate colleges and numerous research centers. The university is responsible for providing education for students from all provinces in Vietnam north of Hanoi.

²⁵ Sai Gon Giai Phong, March 20, 2001, Page 1.

²⁶ Tuoi Tre HCMC, September 27, 2001, Page 1.

²⁷ Vietnam Education, *supra*, No. 3, Page 108-09; Tuoi Tre TPHCM-HCM City Young, February 20, 2001, Page 1; Vietnam News, February 21, 2001, Page 4.

²⁸ Tuoi Tre TPHCM-HCM City Young, February 20, 2001; Vietnam News, February 21, 2001.

²⁹ Vietnam Education, *supra*, No. 3, Page 151-52.

³⁰ Vietnam Education, *supra*, No. 3, Page 142.

Currently, the Government has announced that it intends to reorganize the national universities, Hanoi National University and Ho Chi Minh City University, in particular, to improve the standard of teaching and to build a more elite corps of graduates.³¹ The precise contours of this renovation continue to evolve.

B. Private (Non-public) Education and Training

The Government's focus on the development of education and training in Vietnam more and more relates to increasing educational coverage, changing educational content, and directing scarce resources toward their optimal use so as to provide graduates with the skills necessary to perform effectively in a shifting and developing labor market. A major reform designed to further these objectives is the development of a "non-public" system of education to parallel the public system.

Vietnam's history of free or reliably low cost education and centralized planning made this a politically sensitive direction in which to move. This may explain the reliance on euphemisms, such as "non-public," in most contexts instead of a clear reference to "privatization" of education.³² Nevertheless, these policy changes introduced over a relatively short period of time have had a profound impact on the future of Vietnam's education system. Due to financial constraints and the number of students in need of an education, MOET must encourage the establishment of more private universities.³³ Additionally, MOET has also proposed that some State owned schools in major urban areas be privatized to reduce the burden on the State budget while adding incentives to root out current discrimination between the two sectors.³⁴

There are three different types of non-public educational institutions:

Semi-public ("ban cong"): The facility is owned by the state and managed by a public authority at the central, provincial, district, or commune level, but all operating costs are covered by student fees.

People-founded ("dan lap"): People-founded institutions are owned and managed by non-government organizations or private associations such as trade unions, cooperatives, youth organizations and women's associations. As with semi-public institutions, there is close to full cost recovery. Currently, approximately 16 people founded universities exist and recruit 17,000-18,000 students per year.³⁵

Private ("tu lap"): These are private institutions in the usual sense of the word, owned and managed by private individuals. Fully private institutions are not allowed in primary and secondary education, but only in pre-school, vocational/technical schools, and tertiary education.

³¹ Tuoi Tre HCM, February 20, 2001; Vietnam News, February 21, 2001.

³² Moreover, there remains indirect resistance to private universities often in the form of administrative hassles that limit their ability to compete with state institutions. VET, April Ed. 2002, Page 20; Giao Duc va Thoi Dai, April 9, 2002, Page 4; April 6, 2002, Page 2; April 4, 2002; March 30, 2002; March. 28, 2002; March 26, 2002, Page 4; March 23, 2002.

³³ MOET's stated intention is to have private institutions account for 10% of all student enrollments. Saigon Giai Phong, May 23, 2001, Page 4; Phap Luat, May 24, 2001, Page 2.

³⁴ Tuoi Tre, October 30, 2002, Page 4; Saigon Times Daily, October 29, 2002.

³⁵ Tuoi Tre HCMC, May 29, 2001, Page 2.

ADMISSION TO COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Admission to universities is a two-part process coordinated through MOET. Students must first pass the Secondary School Leaving Examination (SSLE). The SSLE consists of comprehensive achievement tests in six subjects (math, literature, a foreign language, and three alternating subjects) each with a maximum value of ten points, for a total of 40 possible points. In order to graduate, students need to have at least a cumulative average of 20 points. A score below this amount will disqualify them from sitting for the university entrance examination.

University and college entrance exams are divided into four categories according to the fields of study the student plans to pursue and the university offering that subject. The categories of exams and the subjects tested follow:

- *Group A:* tests knowledge of math, physics and chemistry (for students of engineering, computer science, physics, etc.)
- *Group B:* tests knowledge of math, chemistry and biology (for students of medicine and biology)
- *Group C:* tests knowledge of literature, history and geography (for students of social sciences and humanities)
- *Group D:* tests knowledge of literature, math and foreign language (for students of foreign languages, either in education or translation/interpretation tracks, and foreign trade)

In recent years, the cost of annual admission testing on a national basis reached approximately \$67 million.³⁶ Amidst numerous complaints that this amount was excessive and wasteful both for the State and examinees, and that the system was incapable of properly allocating scarce university resources, MOET made significant changes to the testing system in 2002.

Under the current system, students may only register for and take Group A and/or one of Group B, C, or D tests in one of four locations determined by the locale of the primary university to which they wish to gain admission. Because of the significant differences in the subject groupings tested it is unlikely that most students would take more than one test. They may select up to three universities in order of preference for each test taken. If the student scores high enough to enter his/her first choice, then the student is granted admission and he/she is locked into that school.

The stakes for admission are now rather high because in reality most students can only sit for one university examination as opposed to trying their luck on several examinations as in years past. Moreover, although the student will still have a chance at his or her second and third choice schools if he/she fails to achieve the required score for the first university selected, this opportunity will be constrained by two factors: (1) competition with students who selected their second and third choice institutions as their first and the universities' likely preference for first choice students; and (2) students who selected an institution as their second or third choice must attain a score higher than that required for those students who selected those same institutions as their first

³⁶ Tien Phong, July 12, 2001; Nguoi Lao Dong, July 11, 2001, Page 10; Giao Duc va Thoi Dai, July 12, 2001.

choice. Consequently, there is a possibility that a student might not gain admission to any university.

Those students who only wish to enter a junior college must also take a portion of the same tests university bound students take. If they achieve a sufficient score, they are eligible for admission to junior college but still must compete with university bound students who did not receive the score for admission to university but chose the junior college as their second or third choice.

The new system was announced in 2002 in a comprehensive and succinct manner only a few months prior to its actual implementation. Consequently, there was great confusion as to how precisely it would work and what the actual results of its implementation would be for university bound students.³⁷

Regrettably, the new system did not function as planned. The anticipated cost savings failed to materialize and students, largely unprepared for the test, scored significantly lower than in past years making it difficult for universities to fill their vacant slots based on their test score requirements.³⁸ There was widespread criticism of the educational system as the subjects tested were those to have been taught and mastered as part of the standard high school curricula.³⁹

With additional time and better coordination, it is likely that the system will function more smoothly. And, in future years, the Government is considering new permutations of the admissions examination system such as joint examinations of half duration and the introduction of multiple choice tests. It is hoped that these approaches may help reduce costs and lessen the pressure on students.⁴⁰

CATEGORIES OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

Vietnamese higher education programs have been distinguished historically by their flexibility, particularly as regards professional and technical education. In-service courses, shortened programs, accelerated courses and upgrading programs have been a feature of the system and will continue to be as the higher education system is continually forced to provide new programs to meet emerging market demands.

Regular full-time students ("sinh vien chinh quy dai han"): Regular students gain university admission through the examination process outlined above following clearly defined and selective criteria. They may receive a full scholarship, but most pay some fees which usually only represent a fraction of the actual cost of undergraduate study. Students who complete a regular program of study receive a graduation diploma or degree endorsed with the words "chinh quy". Older awards may include the words "dai han" indicating a long-cycle program, normally undertaken in full-time

³⁷ Indeed, there was a decrease of 29.4% in applications for entrance examination testing. Phu Nu TPHCM, June 5, 2002; Giao Duc va Thoi Dai, June 4, 2002; Dai Doan Ket, June 4, 2002, Page 6.

³⁸ Saigon Giai Phong, September 24, 2002; Nguoi Lao Dong, September 21-22, 2002, Page 3; The Thao va Van Hoa, September 10, 2002; Tien Phong, August 27, 2002; Thanh Nien, August 26, 2002.

³⁹ Tuoi Tre, August 20, 2002; Nguoi Lao Dong, August 19, 2002; Phu Nu HCM, August 18, 2002; Lao Dong, August 18, 2002; Quan Doi Nhan Dan, August 17, 2002.

⁴⁰ Tuoi Tre, Jan. 17, 2002, at 1; VNS, Jan. 17, 2002, at 5.

mode. This group is still the largest of the five higher education groups but has declined in recent years as a percentage of the total number of individuals attending colleges and universities.

In-service ("tai chuc"): In-service is another well-established program in Vietnam. In the current system, in-service students, sometimes referred to as "part-time", undertake an abbreviated course while employed. For the most part, these students are civil servants sponsored by their government offices. They are studying to upgrade their skills and to prepare for more difficult or more responsible positions upon completion of their training programs. Until recently this was strictly an employer-nomination scheme, but arrangements are now more flexible as regards courses studied. Courses undertaken in this mode are usually focused on more practical experience rather than the theoretical or academic. Students who complete a degree or diploma in this mode also receive a graduate degree, but it is endorsed with the term "tai chuc".

Open: After 1988-89 a combination of factors, including the abandonment of guaranteed employment for graduates and the acknowledged need for universities to fund themselves to a significant extent, led to the establishment of "open" programs at many universities. Students' access to these courses was based on their ability to pay fees, in some cases almost irrespective of the academic credentials. In general, the curriculum and the teachers were the same for regular and open students, although the classes themselves were usually segregated. Students who completed the open mode degree received a graduation diploma endorsed with the words "mo rong". These degrees did not usually have a high status and were not normally accepted for entry to postgraduate programs.

It was argued that the perceived low quality of the open degrees devalued regular degrees from the same institution, and that the money received did not compensate for the strain on resources. Accordingly, MOET decided in 1992 to modify the open system. Open admission is now restricted to the designated open universities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City and to the junior and community colleges.

Part-time: While universities will no longer offer open admission programs, they are granted the authority to offer part-time programs comparable in requirements and standards to the regular programs. However, students seeking admission must have a baccalaureate and one year's work experience.⁴¹

Short-term Training ("ngan han chuyen tu"): Students who have completed two or three years of secondary technical education or vocational education training and have a diploma or certificate can undertake upgrading courses and obtain a degree after three years rather than the four or five years required by regular students entering directly from upper-secondary school.

Specialized or Retraining Courses ("boi duong va dao tao lai"): Another group of students receiving "upgrading" are those who graduated from higher education institutions in the past and are pursuing training or re-training, often in subjects that were not available previously, in order to deal more effectively with their current jobs or to prepare themselves for new jobs. For example, computer programming is a common subject now being studied by people who graduated from the various engineering and science fields.

⁴¹ Giao Duc va Thoi Dai, February 1, 2001.

UNDERGRADUATE COURSES AND AWARDS

There are two types of undergraduate programs: short-cycle and long-cycle.

Short-cycle programs refer to programs offered at junior or community colleges. The programs normally require three years of study and lead to the Certificate of Higher Education, Junior College Diploma or Associate (Bachelor) degree.

Long-cycle programs are offered by universities and require between four and six years to complete. Upon graduation from a long-cycle program, the Diploma of Higher Education or University Graduate Diploma and/or Bachelor Degree is conferred. Programs in arts, sciences, education, economics, and foreign languages usually require four years of study, although courses involving a major foreign language component in addition to the other major may require five years. Engineering, agriculture and pharmacy degrees normally take five years, although some universities are planning to reduce this to four and expand the graduate programs. Medical and dental programs take six years to complete.

Credit System: A credit system is slowly being introduced around the country and has been adopted by various universities to replace the previous tightly structured subject-based model. In the old system, a class of students entered a program together and stayed together throughout the entire degree program, following the same curriculum. In the new credit system, courses will be assigned a credit value and students must complete a prescribed number of credits before being eligible to graduate. In this system, each credit represents one hour of theoretical lectures (or two thirds of an hour of practical work) plus one hour of preparation per week, over a 15-week semester. Four year programs will normally require a total of 210 credits, five-year programs require 270 credits and six-year programs require 320 credits. The ultimate goal of implementing a credit system, more in line with education systems around the world is two-fold: to provide students the flexibility in their studies to learn more than one main subject and to allow students a way of transferring to other schools or taking classes at other universities.

Two-phase Education System:

- *General Education:* A two-tier degree program was introduced in 1988 whereby the first three to four semesters of study constitute the general stage of core curriculum, preparing students for more specialized studies during the second phase. In the first phase, often referred to as general education, students take general subjects such as humanities, arts, and science. There are seven core groupings: social sciences, humanities, foreign languages, business and management, economics, mathematics and physics, biology, and chemistry.

Completion of the first phase (or the first 90 credits) leads to the award of a Certificate of University Studies which determines eligibility to take the selection examinations for admission to phase two, or the specialized education component. At the end of the general education program, a student's status and scholarship are reviewed. It is also possible for students to change universities at this stage, but in practice this is restricted due to the nature of the core studies program and its availability at another university.

- *Specialized Education:* During the second phase, students take more specialized studies in one or two areas. Programs are based on the list of specialties issued by MOET and comprise about 34 groups and 127 disciplines. This phase concludes with a graduation thesis or project or with comprehensive exams. Formerly, the thesis option was restricted to the best students, but now may be considered as a major equivalent of credits. Not all institutions have adopted the two-phase system, but the universities under complete MOET control have done so.

Degree certificates offered upon completion of the full bachelor program include the title “cu nhan”, followed by the area of specialization. Although this regulation is said to apply across all disciplines, the traditional titles of “engineer”, “doctor”, “architect”, and “pharmacist” are still in use at the same schools rather than “cu nhan”.

GRADUATE COURSES AND AWARDS

Until very recently, postgraduate education remained undeveloped in Vietnam and students tended to go overseas to further their studies. In addition, research institutes at centers of which there were more than 300 in 1993 normally conducted research.

Early postgraduate education programs were based on French models, but from the 1960s in the north and 1976 in the south, Vietnamese postgraduate education followed the Soviet pattern. With the reduction of study opportunities in the former Eastern bloc countries and the increased interest in Western economic methods, the Government is seeking a more flexible and streamlined postgraduate system with clear differentiation from tertiary education, one of the complaints raised against the current system.⁴² Notably, a MOET decision issued in 2002 expanded the ability of students to pursue graduate level study by expanding eligibility to include both regular and in-service graduates.⁴³

Master's Degrees are awarded following a two-year program of course work and thesis defended before external examiners. Entry to the program is by competitive examination. A student needs to have achieved very good marks at the undergraduate level in order to be considered for entry into the master's degree program. In addition, part time graduates who want to pursue a master's degree must also provide a certificate of good performance from their graduating university.⁴⁴

Doctoral Degrees are conferred following a minimum of two years' course work after the master's degree and completion of a thesis or project. A student may, however, be invited to enter into an accelerated master's/doctorate degree program of four years' duration upon graduation from university. The thesis for the doctoral degree is defended before a national committee selected by MOET. Candidature is usually restricted to students who hold a master's degree and who are invited to join the program. However, holders of the undergraduate degree with outstanding achievement may also be admitted to candidature after passing the examinations of the so-called “minimum” program in political subjects, a foreign language, and the relevant academic or professional specialization. MOET Decision No. 02/2001/QĐ-BGD-ĐT tightened the requirements

⁴² Thanh Nien, April 13, 2001, Page 3, Sai Gon Giai Phong, April 12, 2001.

⁴³ Tuoi Tre, April 10, 2002, Page 14.

⁴⁴ Giao Duc & Thoi Dai, February 1, 2001.

for admission by limiting them to outstanding graduates with the highest grades.⁴⁵ The doctoral degree is the highest degree currently available in Vietnam.

This postgraduate structure applies to all disciplines. However, in some professional areas, such as medicine, there are two postgraduate streams, one leading to the two higher academic degrees and the other to higher professional specializations.

GRADING

Since 1971 (1977 in southern Vietnam) a 10-point grading system has been in use at all levels. The normal passing level is 5. The following is published by MOET as the official “definition” of grades, but especially at the tertiary level, this can vary with some institutions assigning 8-9 to the top 5% of students for example.

9-10	uu/xuat sac	excellent/outstanding	about 5% of students
7-8	kha	good	about 35% of students
5-6	trung binh	average	about 50% of students
less than 5	khong dat	fail	about 8% of students
		pass	for pass/fail courses

The grade average usually determines promotion from class to class and semester to semester. Sources differ on whether an average grade of 5 is always required. It appears that in some cases, a score of between 4 and 5 with no 0s may result in a pass.

As well as these subject or course grades at the primary and secondary school levels, general classifications may also be used to describe achievement in major school examinations such as the Secondary School Leaving Examination in which four subjects are examined. The classifications are:

36-40	gioi	very good or excellent
28-35	kha	good
20-27	trung binh	average

At some institutions, another grade, “trung binh kha” (fairly good), has come into use.

A final note is that once accepted to university, most students tend not to concentrate on their grades as much as they had in secondary school. Their focus is more on passing. The top students, however, remain competitive as their scholarships are based on maintaining certain marks.

TUITION FEES AND FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Higher education institutions are permitted to charge fees, subject to government regulations on fee levels, the categories of students permitted to pay reduced fees or exempted from paying fees

⁴⁵ Giao Duc & Thoi Dai, February 1, 2001.

altogether, and the institutions' use of the fees they collect. It is likely, however, that the fee structure will be significantly modified over the next few years.

Under the currently existing fee structure, institutions have a measure of discretion regarding the level of tuition fees charged, but they are required to report their revenue to the line ministry or provincial governments that oversee their operations. Now, fees may also be charged for special services, such as matriculation, examinations, boarding and graduation. In addition, institutions may enter into "training contracts" with employers or provincial authorities to provide in-service training. The fees charged for these services are not regulated and may be set at full cost-recovery.

The current policies on fees and fee exemptions do not take family income into account in determining how much different families or students pay. This has been a concern as higher fees may increasingly result in the exclusion of children from poorer families.⁴⁶ In higher education, fee levels for different programs are supposed to reflect priority subject areas, while specific categories of students, including war invalids, orphans and ethnic minorities, may be granted fee exemptions. In the interest of equity objectives the government does provide scholarships and more recently, no-interest student loans.⁴⁷ Finally, one rural university has creatively introduced a policy whereby students who enter a particular field and work in the locality in that field following graduation for a period of 5 years will receive a waiver of tuition fees.⁴⁸

FUTURE PLANS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Considered a major priority as part of a larger education plan for 2020, Vietnam intends to build a modern system of higher education capable of satisfying the needs of the new economy.⁴⁹ Over time, MOET intends to consolidate the existing university network while constructing universities with higher training quality and better facilities.⁵⁰ As mentioned earlier, in terms of student/population ratios, Vietnam has set a ratio of 140 students per 10,000 people for 2005 with the expectation that it will rise to 200 by 2010 and 300 by 2020.⁵¹ These are ambitious numbers and reaching them will require a coordinated effort in several different areas including better quality

⁴⁶ For example, under a draft increase of ceiling fees circulated in 2002, fees for major urban students would rise to \$33 per month, all expenses included. Yet, the average income in rural areas is only \$17 per month. *Gia Dinh va Xa Hoi*, June 7-11, 2002; *Nong Nghiep Vietnam*, June 6, 2002; *Phu Nu TPHCM*, June 4, 2002; *Lao Dong*, June 4, 2002; *Thanh Nien*, June 2, 2002.

⁴⁷ Though very small in nature and often only sufficient to cover housing, the introduction of student loans is an excellent first step toward making university education more affordable for poorer students. The program still appears to be in its infancy and must yet develop to create a larger capital base as well as develop State enforcement mechanisms to force students to repay the loans that they receive. Numerous recipients under this program have refused to repay their loans because there is no enforcement mechanism to make them do so. This has in turn dampened the enthusiasm of State institutions to provide capital to support the program. *Sinh Vien Vietnam*, July 24, 2001; *Tuoi Tre HCMC*, September 20, 2001; *Dai Doan Ket*, September 23, 2001; *Saigon Giai Phong*, September 19, 2001; *The Gioi Moi*, July 16, 2001.

⁴⁸ *Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, Apr. 17, 2002, Page 6.

⁴⁹ Vietnam Education, *supra*, No. 3, Page 44.

⁵⁰ Example, 4 additional universities are planned for the Mekong Delta. VNS, Mar. 6, 2003.

⁵¹ Vietnam Education, *supra*, No. 3, Page 44.

control, new curricula, improved teaching techniques and staffing,⁵² and most importantly, increased financing from a number of sources.⁵³

Vietnam faces a number of challenges along the way. There has been widespread criticism of a system that is still too Soviet in approach and unwilling to loosen centralized control to allow for competition between the private and State sectors.⁵⁴ In particular many commentators have expressed the concern that outdated knowledge and "ivory tower" curricula repeatedly stifle creative thinking and fail to produce students who can apply academic knowledge to real life situations.⁵⁵ None of these challenges present easy solutions. Nonetheless, the acknowledgement and focus on these issues suggests that MOET is positioning itself to analyze the situation and move toward workable solutions.

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Vocational education in Vietnam occurs at both the secondary and tertiary levels. Because the majority of jobs most greatly needed in Vietnam's transitioning economy relate to technical skills, vocational educational issues have naturally taken on significant prominence. Vocational education's development is challenged both from a supply and demand perspective. From the supply side, there has been and continues to be a shortage of faculty, facilities, equipment, and materials. From a demand side, many students consider vocational education to lack the prestige attributable to a university education. Consequently, they will not pursue a vocational education in favor of a college degree even though unemployment among university students is extremely high. This has caused a huge imbalance in the labor market in Vietnam.

The Government has identified vocational education as a major area for future investment and improvement over time based on its essential relationship to future economic development. By 2005, the Government would like for every city and province to have at least one vocational school.⁵⁶ Improved vocational training for export labor is also viewed as a major solution to rising unemployment as well as a source for income generation.⁵⁷

OVERSEAS AND FOREIGN EDUCATION PROGRAMS

A. Overseas Programs

⁵² Giao Duc va Thoi Dai, February 13, 2001; Saigon Giai Phong, June 13-14, 2001; Ha Noi Moi, June 16, 2001.

⁵³ *Id.* At 44-45; Thoi Bao Tai Chinh, June 14, 2002; Sai Gon Giai Phong, June 13, 2002.

⁵⁴ Giao Duc va Thoi Dai, October 13, 2002; Tuoi Tre, October 11, 2002; Sinh Vien Vietnam, October 7, 2002, Page 30.

⁵⁵ *Id.*; Sai Gon Giai Phong, June 8, 2002; Sai Gon Giai Phong Cuoi Tuan, June 8, 2002; Tuoi Tre, June 6, 2002.

⁵⁶ Nhan Dan, April 18, 2002; Nguoi Lao Dong, April 17, 2002; Lao Dong Xa Hoi, April 17, 2002.

⁵⁷ Giao Duc va Thoi Dai, April 10, 2003, Page 10; Econet, April 10, 2003; Dau Tu, April 8, 2003; Lao Dong Xa Hoi, April 8, 2003; Cong An Nhan Dan, April 8, 2003.

Although most of Vietnam's universities, and in fact its modern education system, is new, one way the government previously made post-graduate education available was through overseas study opportunities. Most political, economic and social leaders today are products of international education, and this will continue to hold true as the Government continues to place high priority on sending its brightest students abroad. As the number of students seeking a college or university education continues to increase, in addition to the new admissions testing procedures, it is likely that many more students will increasingly turn their attention to a foreign education.

From 1951, the former socialist countries helped train over 30,000 undergraduates, 13,500 postgraduates, 25,000 technicians and thousands of other scientists. In 1989, with the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union, Vietnamese students were sent home from all of these countries. Until recently there have been very few opportunities for Vietnamese students to study abroad, leaving about a 10-year gap between those who returned with advanced degrees from the former communist countries and those with the opportunity to study abroad today.

There are only a few full scholarships available to study overseas. Each year, there are approximately 10 Canadian government scholarships, 70 scholarships to study in the UK, 200 for France, 150 for Australia, 70 short-term and 10 long-term scholarships in Thailand, 60 scholarships in Japan and 25 U.S. Government Fulbright Fellowships and around 50 U.S. Government Vietnam Education Foundation (VEF) Fellowships available for master degree students only. An additional and significant number of students receive scholarships and other types of awards directly from universities, nongovernmental organizations, foundations or corporations. The Vietnamese Government, through MOET, has also approved on an annual basis approximately 400 scholarships for state workers to study abroad to improve their skills.⁵⁸ Another estimated 20,000 students are studying abroad each year on institutional scholarships or through their own finances.⁵⁹

A major area of concern in this quickly growing sector of tertiary education has been the role of private consulting services who place students abroad and the ability to track and monitor those students. Scandals in this area are a regrettably common. Another area of major concern relates to the status of students abroad both as to the return of the students to Vietnam following the completion of their coursework abroad as well as the quality of the programs they are pursuing. There has been a gradual understanding that many students may have disincentives to return home because they will be underpaid or the management style of the entities to which they return will not permit them to use the skills they have acquired abroad.⁶⁰ In addition, the rate of unemployment for Vietnamese university graduates continued to hover near 90% in 2002.⁶¹ It is widely recognized that efforts should be undertaken in country to make returning more attractive and to promote job creation for these students. On the supply side, students have often pursued

⁵⁸ Tuoi Tre, December 17, 2002.

⁵⁹ Nguoi Lao Dong, January 7, 2002, Page 6-7.

⁶⁰ Tuoi Tre Thu Do, December 8-15, 2000, Page 5. This particular article cited an example where none of the 145 Ph.D candidates from a research center who were studying abroad returned to Vietnam.

⁶¹ Giao Duc va Thoi Dai, October 13, 2002; Tuoi Tre, October 11, 2002; Sinh Vien Viet Nam, October 7, 2002. Of those graduates who found work, 2/3 worked outside the field that they had studied. Id.

fashionable degrees or levels of study that are not necessarily well matched with the needs of the employers who are in fact hiring.⁶²

Despite these issues, study abroad remains an important and ever popular part of higher education in Vietnam and is widely seen as the key to future success and the acquisition of first-rate skills needed to build and strengthen the country. Students regularly deluge education fairs and are eager to obtain information on the possibilities of studying abroad. Increasingly, there are students who are able to contribute significantly to self-funded education. The Government has also been involved in implementing its own programs to foster the further study abroad of officials and employees with the long-term goal of raising the level of quality of the services it provides.

B. Foreign Education Programs in Vietnam

A sector that is growing quickly within Vietnam is the establishment of foreign education programs run either entirely by foreign universities or through cooperation between a foreign and Vietnamese institution. This sector received a large boost in 2000 with the enactment of Decree No. 06/2000/ND-CP, dated March 6, 2000, which provided incentives for foreign investment in several areas, including education and training.⁶³ In furtherance of a Government decree issued in 2001 regarding the establishment and operation of foreign cultural and educational entities, MOET issued a circular earlier this year indicating that such foreign organizations must submit their establishment license from their home country to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and MOET when they wish to operate in Vietnam. This represents a welcome change that may restrict the entry into Vietnam of "educational institutions" that in fact have no real existence outside of Vietnam.⁶⁴ Foreign entities that do become more involved in the local education market will be encouraged to develop training programs for scientists, technicians, managers and experts in economics, technology, natural sciences, the environment and culture.⁶⁵

In terms of foreign universities in Vietnam already, the new Royal Melbourne IT International University of Vietnam represents the first and only 100% foreign invested international university in Vietnam.⁶⁶ At the same time, a number of foreign institutions have also entered into joint programs with Vietnamese institutions, many of which may involve a study abroad component.⁶⁷ Some of these programs includes the University of Hawaii MBA program in partnership with Hanoi School of Business; Washington State University MBA program with the National Economics University; University of Houston, Clear Lake undergraduate degree with the Hanoi University of Technology; Troy State University undergraduate degree in collaboration with the International College of I.T. & Management.

⁶² Vietnam News, March 28, 2002. Generally speaking, a university education is prized more highly than a vocational one even though employment based on a vocation or trade is more readily available.

⁶³ U.S. Commercial Service, Industry Sector Analysis Vietnam: Education and Training (Industry Sector Analysis), February 28, 2001.

⁶⁴ Tuoi Tre, April 2, 2003; Nguoi Lao Dong, April 1, 2003.

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ Tuoi Tre TPHCM, February 15, 2001, Page 2.

⁶⁷ Industry Sector Analysis, *supra*, No. 62.

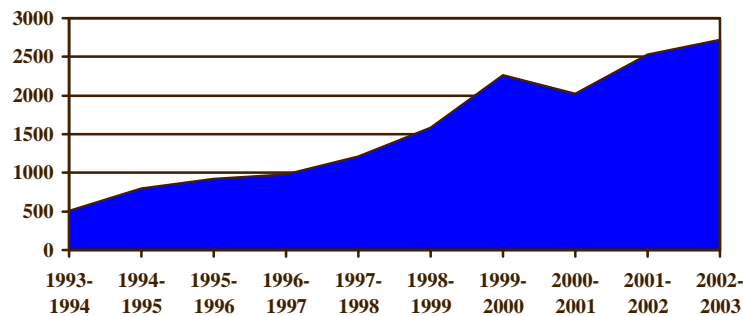
VIETNAMESE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES ⁶⁸

Although a number of countries have increased their interest and presence in Vietnam to attract Vietnamese students,⁶⁹ the U.S. remains by far the favorite destination for Vietnamese students seeking an education abroad. Despite the difficulties in identifying the correct school, avoiding unscrupulous agents, navigating the application process, financing an education, and obtaining a visa, last year the number of Vietnamese students in the U.S. increased to 2,722, an increase of more than 7.5%. With the continued economic development and demand for an education in Vietnam, it is likely that this interest will continue.

⁶⁸ The statistical data in this section has been derived from the Institute of International Education, Open Doors (2003) and the 2002-03 Vietnam Locator Report.

⁶⁹ These countries include Australia and Britain, the governments of which provide substantial backing, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, France, Germany, China, and Russia.

Number of Vietnamese Students Studying in the U.S. by Year



Additional interesting and important facts:

- The 2,722 Vietnamese students studying in the United States are enrolled in over 522 different universities. The University of Oklahoma with 70 (3%) has the largest number of Vietnamese students of any college or university in the U.S. Santa Ana College (CA) which had 101 Vietnamese students last year did not respond this year.
- Vietnam ranks 41st of all countries with international students in the U.S.
- Twenty-eight percent (28%) of Vietnamese study in the top twenty most popular universities (18 or more Vietnamese students). The average number of students per university is four.
- California is the most popular state with Vietnamese students, attracting 535 (24%). States following in order of popularity with Vietnamese are: Texas (172 or 8%); Oklahoma (119 or 6%); Washington (117 or 5%); and New York (102 or 5%). Forty-eight percent (48%) of the Vietnamese students enrolled in U.S. institutions are concentrated in these five states.
- Sixty-eight percent (68%) of all Vietnamese are studying at the undergraduate level. Twenty-three percent (23%) are enrolled in graduate programs while five percent (5%) are listed as non-degree or ESL students.

As more and more information is gradually becoming available to Vietnamese students on the US education system and as the number of college bound students continues to increase, the interest in U.S. education should as well. Although specific hurdles such as financing and visas⁷⁰ may remain, the overall outlook is positive for an ongoing increase in the number of students going to the United States. This outlook should become even more positive if the United States develops an international education policy intended to promote greater competition in the international education market. Currently, that market generates \$12 billion a year for the U.S. economy even in the absence of a coherent national policy.

⁷⁰ Note that Vietnamese students have not experienced any significant delays due to the changes in visa policy following September 11th.